DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 194 CS 003 224

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TITLE Diagnosing and Improving Silent Reading Using "Cloze" Techniques or So What??
INSTITUTION Queensland Univ., Brisbane (Australia). Fred and Eleanor Schonell Educational Research Centre.
PUB DATE Aug 76
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cloze Procedure; Elementary Education; *Primary Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Diagnosis; Reading Improvement; Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; Reading Skills; *Silent Reading; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship between cloze demands and reading comprehension and describes a cloze program used in a third-grade classroom. A series of exercises, including word attack, sentence completion, and vocabulary-development tasks, were given regularly by teachers to the students in their third-grade classrooms. Included in the program were a variety of exercises which drew attention to the role of function words and checked children's understanding of the relationships expressed. In addition to its diagnostic value, the cloze program was effective in raising the children's reading comprehension skills (measured by standardized tests), after both an initial and a subsequent period of eight weeks. (LL)

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DIAGNOSING AND IMPROVING SILENT READING

USING "CLOZE" TECHNIQUES

OR

SO WHAT!

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A paper presented at the SIXTH WORLD CONGRESS ON READING,

SINGAPORE, 17-19 August, 1976

CS 003 224

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One distinctive feature of Australian reading practice during the past decade has been the use of "cloze" procedure reading comprehension tests. Tests by McLeod (1967), McLeod and Anderson (1972) and Elkins and Andrews (1974) have been widely used. Observation of children's attempts at such "cloze" tests suggested that much diagnostic information could be obtained. A belief that diagnosis is most valid in a teaching rather than a testing situation and that "cloze" procedures are effective in teaching as well as in testing led to the research described herein.

The relationship between "cloze" demands and reading comprehension.

As a teaching technique "cloze" programs are frequently suggested for improving reading comprehension although few reports have considered which of the program demands are effective in stimulating performance. There is often the implication that benefits mainly stem from changes in the reader's role from passive receiver or word by word caller, to active participant who must respond to the message. This conception of the reader's role further implies that comprehension will depend not only on the content of the message but also on the characteristics of the reader who is taking an active synthesizing role (Neisser, 1967).

The characteristics of the reader which most influence this role include his motivation, his past experience with the concepts represented by the passage and the present development of his language and

cognitive structures. If a child's reading comprehension skills are to be improved, it would seem that these are the important characteristics to be considered and further developed.

Relating these characteristics to the design of a "cloze" program suggests first that the material be of interest to the reader. It should also attempt to extend the range of concepts already within the child's experience and while it should be related to his present development of language and cognition it should also offer the opportunity to go "beyond the information given" (Bruner, 1973). It seems that such an opportunity is inherent in the nature of "cloze" activity since it has many similarities to Bruner's description of active learning in which the learner constructs hypotheses, alters these in the face of conflicting evidence and thus arrives at novel solutions.

It should be noticed, however, that not all appropriate responses to a "cloze" exercise involve active learning. For instance, "the dog wagged his _____ " requires only a low level of conscious processing for solution. If active learning is to be encouraged as a pre-requisite for the development of comprehension skills, this type of over-learned response is not as relevant as one which requires a deeper level of processing and the application of problem solving skills. "Their island is so _____ you can walk around it in a few _____ ." (Elkins and Andrews, 1974).

The next stage of conscious awareness appears to be involved in thinking aloud and in verbalizing about one's own processing strategies. It is interesting that many writers have recommended this as a follow-up to the completion of "cloze" exercises (Jongsma, 1971).

For verbalization, children must not only be aware of the appropriate reasons for choosing a response but they must also explain their reasons to others and, if necessary, defend their choice. Ryan's (1976) review of meta-linguistic development would suggest that conscious awareness would be beyond the capabilities of younger children, even though they may have used appropriate strategies and arrived at an acceptable solution. It does seem, however, that this may be less apparent for exercises in which the missing element is a label, name or concrete description rather than a relationship.

Even in cases where children have to grope towards an articulate expression, this personal involvement and inter-action with language represents what many writers on classroom language (e.g. Barnes, Britton, Rosen (1971))believe to be necessary if children are to make knowledge their own. In more formal terms, the latter also represents the organization of information into long term memory after it has received selective attention.

It is with regard to the usefulness of this organization that teachers play a vital role. Broadbent (1975) has reminded us that if information is to be useful, it must be organized in long-term memory in such a way that a direct connection is possible between the information and the situation in which it is to be later used. As an illustration, a child may check a "cloze" response appropriately but not learn from his action that he can subsequently bring the same skills to bear in working out an unknown word in a story book.

In order to foster the connection between the child's present skill and its later application, the "cloze" exercises should be followed not only the the children's discussion of words chosen but

also by teacher-directed attention to the possibilities of using the same strategies in future reading. By drawing attention to the specific factors which led to an acceptable response and demonstratting with more examples, the teacher may heighten the child's perception of context as a source of semantic and syntactic cues both for word attack and word meaning.

It is customary for reading teachers to adopt a systematic approach to the teaching of phonic skills and structural analysis. One of the aims of a "cloze" program is to help children find that a systematic use of context clues is also feasible.

Using a "cloze" program in a third grade classroom.

The writers devised a series of exercises to be given regularly by teachers in their third grade classrooms. Each exercise took approximately half an hour to complete and four exercises were scheduled for each week.

Word attack.

The initial tasks required only the over-learned type of response, and nursery rhymes, definitions and familiar expressions provided sentences in which a missing word is highly predictable from the remaining context. This allowed the teachers to demonstrate to children that they have already developed a skill in using prediction which will be useful to them as a reading strategy.

In later exercises, predictability was enhanced by using stories which had been written by children of similar age. By using these stories it was believed that there would be less chance of a mismatch between the conceptual and language structures of the children

and those of the written passages. A language experience approach (Balyeat & Norman, 1975) would be most suitable for individual use from both a predictability and motivational point of view but the present scheme seems to be an appropriate compromise for classroom use, irrespective of the reading approach adopted by the teacher.

The passages included narrative, fantasy, and exposition with "cloze" blanks for every fifth word or every fifth content word or, in some cases, the deletion of a certain form class. In addition, shorter exercises required the completion of a sentence or paragraph so that instead of filling in a missing word, the child had to provide complete phrases or sentences which were compatible with the text provided. It was intended that the children would be stimulated to process words and phrases immediately for meaning and to start making predictions about missing information.

1. Into the blazing building . . . . . .
2. In the train . . . . . .
3. If it gets in . . . . . .

Although this kind of exercise serves a useful purpose, a sentence completion task does not expose children to the extra cues which are available in connected discourse. For this reason, they are not suitable as sole methods of building prediction skills. A "cloze" passage has the advantage that it can be used to demonstrate that semantic and syntactic cues also lie within the flow of discourse and are not necessarily bound by sentence limits. This is an important feature and the need to direct children's attention to these cues seemed particularly necessary since an earlier study comparing the oral reading errors of third graders with their "cloze" errors had

suggested that children tended to process words around the "cloze" blanks only at the phrase level. They made significantly more errors acceptable at phrase rather than sentence level in their "cloze" responses but not in their oral errors, perhaps because a "cloze" blank is perceptually conspicuous for young children and so influences their processing strategies. To counteract this tendency, the practice of reading the mutilated text before starting the exercise was followed throughout (Bortnick & Lopardo, 1973) and some exercises were expressly designed to give practice in using cues well removed from the required response blank. This is illustrated by the first word missing in the following story.

> One day, Peter saw a _____ in the window of the hobby shop. Peter _____ a very determined boy and would _____ anything to get what he _____ . He really wanted this boat.

Vocabulary Development.

As well as giving children practice in the use of context clues to fill in missing words or phrases, exercises were also designed to help the children learn that the same kind of clues can also be used to provide the meaning of an unknown word. One such passage introduced the word luminous in the final paragraph.

> So Becky coated paper _____ a special luminous paint. If she put the painted paper _____ a lamp, it would trap the light. The paper glowed for hours and Becky was _____ to write in the dark.

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A sentence completion test including the item

Luminous means . . . . . .

was given before and after the class complete the "cloze" exercise. This indicated that 19 out of 60 children were able to give the correct meaning after but not before reading the "cloze" story, and one child responded with what is almost an unsolicited testimonal:

"At thirst I thout it ment dark now I know it means light".

Other vocabulary exercises included passages in which only certain descriptive words were deleted, i.e. those describing a sound or movement. This also gave the children an opportunity to compare stereotyped descriptions with possible alternatives. Class suggestions for sounds, _____ of birds, and _____ of children, included tweet, whistle, song, chirp, cheep, chatter and squawk for the first word but the second word was chosen from the noisy end of the scale, yell, scream, shout, cry, call, chatter, while only one of seventy children suggested laughter!

This type of exercise is also suitable for use with older readers and if an extract from a story or poem is used, the author's choice of words can later be compared and contrasted with the class versions.

Diagnosis.

Also included in the program were a variety of exercises which drew attention to the role of function words and checked children's understanding of the relationships expressed. These included transition words which signalled cause and effect (because, so), contrast (but), time order (before, after, then next, when while, as soon as) and condition (if ... then). In most cases these were first used in a "cloze" story but in conventional "cloze" tasks with no given sample of words from which to choose a response, many children responded with "and" to signify any form of continuing relationship.

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The different relationships were then later examined further in exercises of varying task demands.

A. One day, when John and Peter were _____ home, they saw a little _____ . The kitten was very dirty and _____ to be hungry. The boys took her _____ and gave her some _____ .

Next day, John and Peter went back to the _____ _____ and _____ _____ .

After a _____ , a boy came up and said "_____ _____ ."

John and Peter were _____ that the kitten was _____ back to her home but they were a little _____ to see her go.

B. 1. The children went swimming so _____

2. The children went swimming but _____

3. The children went swimming because _____

C. Choose your answer from one of these words: - so
if
because

1. He is tired _____ he did not sleep well last night.
2. Ann liked reading _____ she wanted a book for her birthday.
3. My grandfather is deaf _____ I have to speak loudly to him.

This procedure indicated that some children of this age do not fully understand these relationships. The distinction between "so" and "because" was not known and many children confused the meanings of sentences in which "before", "after", "as soon as" were used in such a way that the written order did not correspond to the event order. This latter confusion has been well documented in research into children's oral language development (Clark, 1971) and it may be anticipated that the difficulties would become even more pronounced in a task which involves production within a reading and writing framework.

Other difficulties which have been reported by researchers into children's language development were also identified. These included reversible sentences, tag questions, pronoun referents and the ask-tell distinction investigated by Chomsky (1969). Of these, the most prevalent confusion lay in the question-answer concept which has implications also for punctuation, since the confusion was often reflected in errors in the use of inverted commas and question marks.

The girl asked the boy what to feed the cat. The girl said, ...

The children's answer to this was often "cat food" or "why don't you feed him cat food?" or "Kit-Kat". Perhaps the best known "cloze" test related to this construction is the first passage of the GAP Reading Comprehension Form R. (McLeod, 1967).

"Will _____ be a jet pilot when you grow _____?"
mother asked Tom.

Nine percent of a fifth grade sample wrote I for the first response which may indicate both egocentrism and a continuing difficulty with this form of construction.

The use of "cloze" techniques augmented by sentence completion exercises proved to be a convenient classroom method of diagnosing linguistic confusions. In keeping with present beliefs that children extract their own rules from their language environment, it seems that the next step will be for teachers to devise models in a form which children can readily interpret. For instance, question-answer situations in the classroom and time order examples may be cued by pragmatic considerations.

I put on my shoes after I put on my socks.

Before I get dressed in the mornings, I get out of bed.

Results.

In addition to its diagnostic value, the "cloze" program was also effective in raising the children's reading comprehension skills (measured by standardized tests) after both an initial and a subsequent period of eight weeks. It may be inferred that the task demands of the exercises, the language interaction which followed, and teacher-directed attention to specific applications, have all contributed to growth in the conceptual and linguistic skills which influence comprehension. The relative contribution of these three factors is not known and indeed this will vary from individual to individual.

Finally, it should also be noted that each one of these factors may exist at different levels. Tasks may vary from those requiring a low level of conscious processing to those demanding a high level of

reasoning ability. The language interaction may change from an abbreviated almost telegraphic supply of labels to a sophisticated analysis of linguistic processing.

Teacher-directed attention may at first focus on highly predicable context but may later be expanded to the use of transition clues and inference from more abstract textual materials.

Each one of these factors may be varied according to the characteristics of the individual learner and at different ages each child may benefit from a program which attempted to match these factors to his needs and present development.

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